SUE OLLERHEAD

5. "BASICALLY, I NEED HELP"

Responding to Learner Identity in a Skills-Driven ESL Literacy Programme

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, increasing numbers of adult learners from refugee backgrounds enter literacy and numeracy programmes with restricted literacy in their first language and little or no understanding of English as a medium of instruction. Many of these learners have come to Australia under the Government's humanitarian programme, which provides settlement for refugees from war-affected countries such as Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Myanmar. Australian education authorities note that, on the whole, the educational needs of learners from refugee backgrounds are significantly more pressing and complex than those of other migrants settling in the country, with many learners having experienced severely disrupted or no formal education at all (New South Wales Department of Education and Communities [NSW DEC], 2014).

As in most other parts of the world, Australian literacy policy and programming has largely been informed by cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives. Formal literacy programmes thus frequently align with what Street (1996) terms an 'autonomous' model of literacy, which conceptualises literacy as a suite of neutral, technical skills that can be acquired independent of context. In such programmes, learners are positioned as being either literate or illiterate, and those that are illiterate are considered to be 'deficient' (Perry, 2012, p. 53).

This chapter investigates and illuminates the myriad, complex obstacles and barriers to learning faced by adult learners with limited experience of English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy. In particular, it investigates how these challenges impact upon their identity development as learners. In exploring these themes, the chapter draws upon case study research conducted within Australia's Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme (LLNP), which is framed within an economic, functional and skills-driven model of literacy. The findings are examined through a sociocultural lens, drawing upon the research of scholars such as Heath (1983), Street (1984) and Barton and Hamilton (1998), which defines literacy in terms of what learners already do with literacy, rather than what they cannot yet do. From this perspective, literacy is viewed as a set of embodied practices carried out within a particular social and cultural context.

ESL LITERACY LEARNERS AND THE LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND
NUMERACY PROGRAMME (LLNP)

In this chapter, the term 'ESL literacy learners' refers to adults, many of whom are migrants from refugee backgrounds, who are learning to read and write in English for the first time. What distinguishes them from other literacy learners is that they face the challenge of learning how to read and write in a *second* language, in this case English, with little proficiency in that language, and very limited familiarity with literacy. Van der Craats, Kurvers and Young-Scholten (2006) emphasise the complex cognitive demands made of adult ESL literacy learners, observing that, in contrast, most children develop literacy only after they have acquired much of their first language. In Australia, it is these adult learners who, after having received 510 hours of free English language learning through a government funded settlement English programme called the Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP), find themselves registered as jobseekers who are eligible for additional literacy and numeracy training.

The Language, Literacy and Numeracy Programme, which was renamed the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Programme in 2013, is administered through Australia's social security programme Centrelink, and caters for the long-term unemployed. Its stated objective is to "improve clients' language, literacy and/or numeracy with the expectation that such improvements will enable them to participate more effectively in training or in the labour force and lead to greater gains for society in the longer term" (Australian Government Department of Human Services, 2014). The programme provides up to 800 hours of free accredited language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) training for eligible job seekers whose LLN skills are below the level considered necessary to obtain employment.

Perkins (2009) observes, however, that many so-called 'clients' entering the programme at beginner level are migrants with refugee backgrounds, who exhibit very little understanding of the work or training opportunities available to them. They have had little experience of formal education, and often have pressing social and family obligations that prevent them from attending class regularly. Exacerbating these challenges is the fact that the programme stipulates rigid timeframes within which learners have to exhibit progress in discrete skills, contradicting Tarone and Bigelow's (2012) research findings that, for ESL literacy learners with little formal schooling, literacy progress is often erratic, non-linear and not observable over a short time-period. There thus appears to be a marked incongruity between the LLNP's explicit aims of preparing its clients for the workforce on one hand, and its responsiveness to its clients' most pressing social and learning needs on the other.

CONTEXTUALISING THE CASE STUDY

The four learners reported on in this chapter were participants in a broader, multi-site case study doctoral research project into learner and teacher identity and pedagogies

for ESL literacy learners within the LLNP (Ollerhead, 2013). During this study, the researcher interviewed two head teachers, four teachers and 53 learners in four different classrooms located at two large vocational training colleges. In addition, the researcher observed teaching practices and learner behaviours within four classrooms on six different occasions, providing a total of approximately 48 hours of classroom observation data. During these observations, the researcher acted as a participant observer, assisting the teacher during classroom lessons by helping small groups of learners to complete reading and writing tasks. The research was conducted under the auspices of a leading Australian research university, which granted ethics approval for the study.

All of the learners reported on in this chapter attended the LLNP at a large vocational college, located in an ethnically and socially diverse suburb of a major Australian city. The area was home to a sizeable migrant population, with 30 percent of residents having been born overseas, and 23 percent coming from non-English speaking backgrounds. The learners' teachers described them as being at "marginally-post-beginner level" despite all of them having undergone 510 hours of English language learning through the AMEP.

Having sketched the setting and participants involved in the case study, the discussion will now delineate the theoretical framework within which the research was conducted.

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ADULT ESL LITERACY LEARNER IDENTITY

In the context of this study, the roles that learners play within the classroom and society more broadly are inextricably linked to their identities. In recent years, there has been a surge in research into the link between learning and identity (see Block, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Toohey, 2000). A review of the literature suggests that identity refers to the ways in which individuals understand their relationship to their social world. It is temporal and fluctuating, shaped by social context and resulting from their membership of a community.

In recent times, most discussions about identity and language learning by scholars such as Block (2008), Menard-Warwick (2006), and Zuengler and Miller (2006), draw strongly upon Bonny Norton's theorisation of identity (Norton-Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000). Norton's conceptualisation of identity is presented within a post-structuralist framework, linked to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991). Within this paradigm, language is conceived of as the vehicle for social organisation, power relations and individual awareness (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) and learners are regarded as participating in specific communities of practice, in which they negotiate different ways of belonging (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Thus, far from being a process of merely gaining skills and knowledge, language learning is a process of 'becoming' and identity negotiation (Wenger, 1998).

Furthermore, Norton and Pavlenko (2004) observe that learning a new language is particularly relevant to capturing learners' desires to assume broader identities. Perhaps nowhere could this observation be more relevant than in the case of language learners who also happen to be newly-arrived migrants with refugee backgrounds, settling into a highly literate country like Australia, intent on building new lives.

The multifaceted accounts that learners give of their life histories align with the assumptions underlying the theoretical construct of investment (Norton-Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000), which considers learners as having highly variable social pasts and aspirations. Norton posits that, while a learner may be decidedly motivated to learn a language, they may nevertheless have little investment in the practices of a language classroom that they perceive to be exclusionary. Exclusionary practices would include elements of content, pedagogy or activities that were, for example, racist or sexist in nature.

These ideas of imagined communities and investment in language education research are instrumental in foregrounding the learner, whose voice has largely been absent from language education research studies, even those that are classroom-based (Rea-Dickins, Kiely, & Yu, 2007; Yoon, 2008).

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING LEARNER IDENTITY

In examining learners' conceptualisation of their roles within the LLNP, this research builds upon an analytical framework formulated by Rea-Dickins et al. (2007) to explore how learners' sociocultural backgrounds and intrapersonal reflections upon themselves as learners contribute to their identity formation.

In this section, the theoretical bases of the three analytical components of the working model, namely sociocultural conceptualisations of self, conceptualisations as learners, and identities of becoming, will be outlined and discussed.

Component A: Learners' Sociocultural Conceptualisations of Self

The first of the analytical components focuses on the socio-historical perspectives of learners' pasts. It draws on learners' narrative accounts of their previous social, professional and cultural experiences. These narrative accounts are representations of the learners' subjective sense of self, referred to by Wenger (1998) as the 'imagination'. This aspect of the model positions each of the learners that were interviewed within a sociocultural context. Of particular salience were the ways in which the learners aligned themselves with particular cultural contexts and traditions of learning (Rea-Dickins et al., 2007).

Component B: Learners' Conceptualisations of Themselves as ESL Literacy Learners

The second component of the past included in the model, is the way in which learners position themselves internally, in terms of how they conceptualise themselves as

learners and how they perceive their learning potential. A core assumption is that this intra-personal knowledge, viewed by Davies and Harré (1990) as reflective self-positioning, will impact on how learners engage with their future learning and the processes involved in negotiating membership of a "new" learning community.

The ways in which learners view their ESL literacy proficiency and engagement with learning are part of their subjective sense of self. However, according to Wenger (1998), the ways in which learners view themselves and the ways in which they are viewed by "significant others" are inseparable. In contemporary language education research, there is a growing number of studies that suggest the way teachers position their learners is linked to the ways in which learners position themselves, and guides their participatory practices in the classroom (see Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, & Wortham, 2009; Haneda, 2008; Miller, 2011; Reeves, 2009; Yoon, 2008).

Included in component B are data about how learners used specific literacy materials in everyday life. The researcher wanted to form a clearer picture of learners' 'out of school' ways of practising literacy, in other words, how they interacted with literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). During each interview, learners were presented with realia prompts to elicit information about their literacy uses, referred to from hereon as 'literacy prompts'. These included a supermarket flyer advertising food and clothing items, an English community newspaper, a phone bill, an electricity bill, a bus timetable, a map, a box of couscous bearing preparation instructions, and a reading book for children. The purpose of these prompts was to determine how learners' narrative accounts of their uses of literacy were borne out by their initial reaction to and actual interaction with the various materials.

Component C: Identity Formation as a Mode of "Becoming"

The final component of the model, part C, deals with identity as a process of "becoming". In this sense, it draws on Wenger's (1998) notion of learning as a process during which individuals progress from a form of non-participation or peripheral participation in a community of practice, towards a position of active participation and engagement in an ESL literacy learning community. The model also highlights Wenger's assertion that this developmental process constitutes a tension or 'duality' within the individual. This implies a conflict between individuals' willingness or desire to embrace new learning opportunities, and the idea of 'fixedness', when individuals limit their learning potential by clinging to tightly held self-beliefs, such as being too old to learn. It also examines learners' perceptions of their own agency in learning English versus the perceived agency of significant others, such as teachers, community members or first language speakers of English.

This component is also strongly linked to future, imagined identities. According to Wenger (1998), one of the chief means by which individuals negotiate the struggle implicit in moving from non-participation to active participation within a specific community, is by drawing on resources of the imagination. Clearly, teaching

practices that enable learners to draw on their imagined identities are key to learners' ability to access these resources.

METHODOLOGY

There were two main levels of data captured on learners, namely biographical background information on the whole class obtained from class records and qualitative data obtained from learners during focus group interviews.

Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach informed by the study's conceptualisation of learner identity. The conceptual framework was informed by a perspective on learning as identity development and the processes of establishing membership of a community of practice (as proficient English users within an Australian context).

Throughout the period of this study, the researcher was committed to including the learners' voices as a crucial element of the data. The motivation was not only to triangulate teacher and classroom observation data in order to provide a thick description of the observed practices, but also to record learners' thoughts in their capacity as crucial stakeholders in decisions regarding policy and practice within the LLNP. It was for this reason that interviews were conducted in learners' first languages with the aid of interpreters to facilitate their sharing of in-depth thoughts and opinions (the interpreter translated learners' L1 responses into English for the benefit of the interviewer).

Each of the learners reported on in this chapter was interviewed as part of the focus group interviewing process, which involved 16 learners from the core language groups, namely Arabic, Cantonese, French, Urdu and Vietnamese.

The core aim of this research phase was to obtain information from learners regarding their literacy needs and expectations as viewed through the lens of identity development.

LEARNER FINDINGS

The four learners reported on in this chapter are presented in Table 1. To reduce ambiguity, the data pertaining to each learner are presented and grouped under section headings relating to their respective classroom teachers, namely Paula and Lucy (all names are pseudonyms).

Paula's Class

Paula's class comprised 12 female learners and one male learner, representing six nationalities. Their median age was 39, and they had on average two years of formal schooling experience. Six of the learners had no experience of formal learning. Seven of the learners reported bilingual proficiency, and 12 different first languages were represented in this learner population (see Table 2).

Table 1. Reported learner sample (selected on the basis of nationality, linguistic background, age, gender and experience of formal schooling)

Learner information	Paula's class	Lucy's class
Learner name	Fatimah; Hassan	Yeanor; Mariam
Nationality	Sudanese; Sudanese	Sierra Leonean; Sudanese
First languages	Arabic; Arabic and Fur	French, Krio and Temne; Nuba, Arabic
Age	28; 36	41; 34
Gender	Female; Male	Female; Female
Years of schooling	7; 0	6; 0

My discussion of Paula's learners is based on a Sudanese Arabic focus group interview. From the collected data, I chose to report on two learners, named Fatimah and Hassan. I wanted to find out how they aligned themselves with their past, in terms of their membership of a particular cultural context, and within a set of learning traditions. I also wanted to find out how they conceptualised themselves as learners, and how they envisaged their future roles with regard to ESL literacy learning.

Table 2. Biographical learner information for Paula's class

Nationality	First languages	Age	Gender	Years of schooling
Afghani	Dari	44	F	3
Afghani	Farsi	48	F	0
Korean	Korean	34	F	8
Pakistani	Urdu	42	F	0
Sri Lankan	Tamil/Sinhalese	49	F	0
Sudanese	Dinka/Arabic	52	F	0
Sudanese	Dinka/Arabic	46	F	0
Sudanese	Nuba/Arabic	34	F	0
Sudanese	Dinka/Arabic	34	F	4
Sudanese	Arabic	28	F	7
Sudanese	Nuer/Arabic	29	F	4
Sudanese	Fur/Arabic	36	M	0
Vietnamese	Vietnamese	42	F	4

Fatimah   Fatimah, a 29-year old single mother, had markedly higher levels of formal education than most of the other members of Paula's class. She had attended

school in northern Sudan for six years, where, as well as her basic mother tongue Arabic, she was taught basic English language skills.

At the age of 13, the ongoing civil war in Sudan forced Fatimah's family to flee to Egypt, where they lived as refugees without any rights to formal employment or education. Fatimah spent seven years in Egypt with no schooling. As her parents could not work, she obtained live-in domestic work to help her family to pay for accommodation and to "survive". This she did for seven years until her family obtained refugee status in Australia. During the eighteen months that she had lived in Australia with her family, Fatimah had worked intermittently as a cleaner, in a hairdresser's and a fruit shop.

Fatimah expressed that she wanted to learn English so that she could know more about Australia and its people. She was determined to get an Australian qualification so that she could get a "better" job than those she had held previously. She envisaged a future career in aged care or nursing.

Fatimah had completed her initial 510 hour language education entitlement within the AMEP. She relates the experience as being largely unsatisfactory:

> I did a test and was put in level 2. I can't read well and I can't write a story well. The teacher give us a paper, and just maybe if you can read one time, then that's it. Then answer questions. Sometimes they used to get angry if we asked a question.

In contrast, her experience within the LLNP had been largely favourable, in large part because of her positive experience of Paula's teaching.

> I love here at [college] the way the teacher teaches. She lets us laugh and enjoy to learn English. To know more, to try, I'm happy with that. If we can all find teachers like Paula, then we could all be happy and like to learn English.

When questioned about her everyday uses of literacy, Fatimah reported using only the supermarket flyers to find certain food items, although she admitted experiencing difficulty with reading and understanding the prices of each item. She said she would like to read children's books to her six-year-old son, but did not have access to any at the College library.

Hassan.   Hassan was a 36-year-old married father of three young children, two of whom had physical disabilities. He had lived in Australia for two years. Hassan came from the Darfur region of western Sudan, an area that was in a state of humanitarian emergency between 2003 and 2010, due to intense fighting between the Janjaweed-aided Sudanese government and the non-Arabic indigenous population resulting in considerable loss of life and population displacement. In 2004, he fled to Egypt, where, as a refugee, he was not able to access any form of education. For three years, he worked as an informal labourer in exchange for food and shelter. Hassan related

his distress at having to leave his mother and father behind in a refugee camp in Darfur, and how the tragic events of the past ten years of his life in Darfur affected his ability to concentrate on learning.

> When the problems started, our village was burnt down, everything was burnt down. My brother was killed, but we managed to escape to Egypt in 2004 and then I come to Australia in 2006.

Hassan's prime motivation for learning English was so that he could meet and interact with other Australians. He hoped to achieve sufficient English proficiency to find work as a truck driver or security guard.

Hassan appeared to feel equipped with little agency as a learner, and constantly reiterated his need for "help with English". He found reading and writing particularly difficult, because of the differences in the Arabic and English alphabets. While he professed to "love" English and wanted to learn it, he explained that there was nobody at home to help him with his learning. His children were too young to attend school, so did not yet speak English, and his wife had as yet been unable to attend the AMEP as she had a four-month old baby. His inability to communicate and interact in English had left him feeling socially isolated.

> When I arrive, there was nobody to talk to, nobody to help, I couldn't understand many things. Even when I do the AMEP, when I go home, everything is closed, nothing that you can understand. So it is very, very difficult. I can just hold a book, but what is there is always my problem. The alphabet … because I've never been to school, nobody is there at home to help. These are my problems. And then there are letters always coming from different government services, to my house. They always stay there, nobody to help me.

While Hassan felt that he benefited from attending the LLNP, he acknowledged that his progress in ESL literacy learning was slow. After two years of attending classes twice a week, he was now able only able to write his name and his address. Nevertheless, he was determined to "improve to write more".

When shown the literacy prompts, Hassan identified the supermarket flyers as the texts he used most frequently. He enjoyed being able to identify bargains and his ability to relate the prices of different items supported his assertion that he was "quick with numbers". In addition to attending the LLNP, Hassan tried to improve his English by listening to cassettes and by watching *The Simpsons* (an American sitcom) on television. While he had no English-speaking friends to help him, Hassan relied on the sporadic help of a Sudanese friend with more advanced English skills to help him to fill out forms or read important documents.

While Hassan was generally happy with the way he was learning and progressing, and with the tuition he was receiving, he spoke poignantly about his desire to have one-on-one assistance.

> Basically, I need help. Help in reading, writing and speaking. To read newspapers, to get work … but basically I need assistance to understand Australia. I do not understand the country and its people and how things work.

Fatimah and Hassan shared similar experiences of civil war and displacement. They also shared the experience of being denied access to education while living as refugees in a transit country, and of having to perform menial work in order to survive. They thus had a mutual understanding of the experience of social marginalisation.

Both Fatimah and Hassan articulated a determined desire to learn more about their new country, thus highlighting their social isolation versus their desire for integration. Both learners' imagined identities revolved around getting a job, as a nurse and security guard respectively. The imagined benefits of employment signified more than financial security, however. They also implied access to broader social and cultural capital in their newly adopted country.

Significantly, however, Fatimah and Hassan's accounts reflect markedly different conceptualisations of their social and learning identities, influenced by their perceptions of their own agency. Fatimah's positive experience of Paula's teaching, following a negative learning experience within the AMEP, was echoed in her optimistic and clearly articulated imagined identity of "getting a better job" and "learning more about the country". Fatimah's expression that she loved the way "the teacher teaches", points to her positive conceptualisation of herself as a learner, suggesting that she was highly invested in Paula's teaching practices in the classroom, a place where she felt valued and respected.

Hassan's imagined identity and self-conceptualisation as a learner was framed in markedly more negative terms. He frequently expressed the need for help in order to "understand Australia", which reflected his social isolation. He clearly attributed agency to significant others with the requisite knowledge to help him. A survivor of one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters in Darfur, his experiences of loss and trauma seemed to be reflected in his sense of social isolation and helplessness as a newly-arrived migrant to Australia.

Lucy's Class

Lucy's class, like Paula's, was largely multicultural and multilingual. It comprised nine female learners, representing six nationalities. Their median age was 50, and they had on average three years of formal schooling. Three learners reported having had no experience of formal learning. Five of the learners were multilingual, reporting that they spoke two or more first languages. Thirteen different first languages were spoken by the learners in this class (see Table 3).

This discussion of Lucy's learners emanates from two separate interviews conducted with two female learners, namely Yeanor, a 41-year-old learner from Sierra Leone, and Mariam, a 34-year old learner from Sudan. The interview with Yeanor was conducted in English, although her first language was Krio. Despite

Table 3. Biographical learner information for Lucy's class

Nationality	First languages	Age	Gender	Years of schooling
Chinese	Mandarin	47	F	4
Kurdish	Kurdish	49	F	3
Liberian	Maninka/Liberian Kreyol	47	F	4
Samoan	Samoan	53	F	0
Sierra Leonean	Krio/Temne/French/Arabic	41	F	6
Sudanese	Madi/Arabic	64	F	0
Sudanese	Nuba/Arabic	34	F	0
Sudanese	Dinka/Arabic	58	F	3
Sudanese	Nuer/ Arabic	62	F	4

English being the official language of Sierra Leone, Krio is the lingua franca, spoken by 90 percent of the population. Krio and English share many common vocabulary items and grammatical structures, with additional elements from the Yoruba and Igbo languages spoken in Nigeria. Yeanor therefore spoke English fairly fluently, and opted to be interviewed in English rather than in Arabic or French. The interview with Marian was conducted in Arabic, with the assistance of an Arabic interpreter. Mariam and Yeanor's biographical backgrounds are described below.

Yeanor.   Yeanor had lived in Australia for just over a year. She was a widowed mother of three daughters, aged 18, 13 and 11. The researcher's initial observations of Yeanor during classroom lessons revealed that she frequently became anxious when asked directly to perform tasks in English, such as write her name, or answer a question in front of other class members. She would visibly tremble, shake her head and express her inability to respond.

   Like many learner participants in this study, Yeanor possessed a wide range of oral linguistic resources. She came from a large ethnic group called the Temne from the country's north, and thus spoke the Temne local dialect. She also spoke Sierra Leonian Krio, French and Arabic, and had a working knowledge of the Guinean languages Susu and Maningu, as a result of having lived in Guinea for over nine years.

   Yeanor grew up in Makeni, the fifth largest city in Sierra Leone. She attended primary school for six years, until the age of 13, when she got married and became pregnant. Yeanor's apparent anxiety in completing writing tasks in class belied the fact that she had been taught to read and write in both Arabic and English, although most of her education had been in Arabic. Yeanor clearly conceptualised herself as a survivor of torture and trauma. She expressed a clear awareness of the impact of her traumatic past experiences on her ability to remember things learned in class. She was no longer able to read and write as she had once been able to as a child.

Yes I still write a little bit Arabic, but because of war, brain just … when I remember what happened, when I see it in (memories) in my mind, I feel torment. I think, think, think about home all the time. I have lots of problems.

The war Yeanor refers to is the Sierra Leonean civil war, which raged from 1991 to 2002 and left 50,000 people dead. During this time, Yeanor suffered the torture of having her house burnt down and her husband killed in front of her. She managed to flee with her family to the ferry terminal at Freetown, and after two long boat and truck journeys, arrived at the Boureah refugee camp in Guinea. She lived there for two years, before moving to Conakry, Guinea's capital and largest city. Here she worked as a hawker of clothing to feed and support her children.

After nine years living as refugees in Guinea, Yeanor and her three daughters joined extended family in Australia once her refugee status had been approved, though many of her siblings remained in Sierra Leone.

Despite her patent sadness about her past, Yeanor expressed a clear imagined identity in the form of obtaining a formal qualification so that she could find a job. She had already completed a cleaning and childcare course through a community college, but had her heart set on being an aged care nurse. She had completed half of her aged care course, yet had failed the written component of the certificate twice. Yet it was not only an occupation and financial security that Yeanor craved. She also expressed a fervent desire to make Australian friends, not only to help her with her English, but to help her understand and join in the Australian way of life. She positioned herself as being socially marginalised, but firmly believed that once she was able to get a job, she would be able to make some Australian friends and integrate better, as witnessed in the following interview exchange:

Yeanor: I don't have any white friends to encourage me, no work. Like … someone to take care of me. At times it's so lonely, so boring. Not have a lot of company. Like today you talk to me so I feel fine. You okay with me today, you ask me some questions, so I feel lively. But I don't have communion, at work, to discuss together.

Interviewer: Mmmm. Do you think it will help if you find a job?

Yeanor: Any friendly job. Then any friend, with a white colour, will help me so much. Sometimes I feel so sad. So sad at times. Even at school there are times I can come and not get happy, teacher say what's wrong?

During the interview Yeanor twice referred to her desire to make friends with a person "of white colour". The researcher came to understand that she used this term to refer to people whom she assumed were of Australian nationality. She seemed to attribute agency to them as significant others, in the sense that they would help her to feel more integrated into Australian society.

Yeanor's chief interactions with literacy materials were related to her beliefs as a devout Muslim. She would rise at five o'clock every morning to pray and read the Quran. She reported limited use of the other literacy prompts shown to her. Although she thought that advertising pamphlets for fresh products were useful, she struggled to read the prices of each item, saying, "I used these in Africa a lot, then I come here and I get afraid".

Yeanor explained that she also received English language learning help from her daughters, who would borrow books from their school library to read with her at home. She was also forced to speak English to her niece, who lived with her, and spoke neither Krio nor Temne.

> Whenever I speak she says, "Oh no, speak Aussie English, Aunty!" But at least I can speak Temne to my sister and my daughters. It is important for them for their culture to still speak Temne.

Yeanor's earnest attempts at learning English in the face of significant barriers to learning are representative of many of the learners' struggles to participate meaningfully in the classroom which represented a literacy learning community of practice. Her case also highlights the ever-present duality or tension inherent in identity negotiation through language learning (Wenger, 1998). Although Yeanor expressed an imagined identity that included a job and white, Australian friends, her memories of the past, yearning for family in Sierra Leone and her desire to maintain her Temne culture and language reflect a strong allegiance to her Temne heritage.

Mariam.   Mariam was a 34-year-old married mother of four children, who had lived in Australia for two years. She came from the Nuba district of central Sudan, a remote and inaccessible region where the lifestyle was largely agricultural. Before coming to Australia, she had no experience of formal schooling. She recalled her bewilderment when arriving in a classroom for the first time:

> I had never even sat at a desk before, written in a book or even held one. Then I was expected to learn my ABCs. I really struggle(d).

Mariam had undergone 510 hours of English tuition through the AMEP, before being referred to the LLNP, which she had been attending for six months. At the time of interviewing, she admitted that she still experienced significant difficulty with reading and writing in English. She cited her many family responsibilities as a major distraction from learning.

> I am very busy at home with the food, the shopping and the cooking and cleaning.

The duality of the process of identity formation is thus reflected in Mariam's desire to become proficient in English and her loyalty and alignment to her traditional roles of mother and homemaker, each of which seemed to be in conflict with the other.

Mariam's expression of an imagined identity was reflected in her assertion that her prime motivation for learning English was "to get any job suitable for woman, like cleaning or childcare". She positioned herself as a struggling learner. Despite her children's (aged 12, nine, and five) efforts to teach her, she relayed that "my mind is not getting the message, maybe because of my old age". Mariam reported trying to learn English at home through listening to English cassettes borrowed from the college, but admitted that she preferred to watch television shows like *The Simpsons* to try to improve her English.

Mariam's everyday use of literacy materials was limited. While she claimed to "have the intention" of practising her reading outside of the classroom, she struggled to make sense of any written material. When shown the literacy prompts, she expressed interest in the supermarket advertising pamphlets, particularly the pictures of clothing, but said she could not understand any of the accompanying text, including the numbers. She also found the children's reader too difficult to read aloud, saying that she would not attempt to read it to her children.

Mariam's perception of her learning difficulties, coupled with her onerous household responsibilities, contributed to her perceived lack of agency in making progress with English learning.

DISCUSSION

The learners' firsthand accounts shed valuable light not only on their life histories and past experiences, but also on how they perceived their individual learning trajectories and plans for the future. Munoz (1995) asserts that:

> To study identity means to explore the story of identity – the narrative of identity – the ways we tell ourselves and others who we are, where we came from, and where we are going. (p. 46)

The four learners reported on in this chapter were representative of the 16 learners interviewed as part of the original study. They shared common experiences of trauma as a result of violent conflict and civil war in their home countries. The theme of displacement was also prevalent in their narratives. Having fled their countries of origin, some learners had spent considerable periods of time in transit countries as refugees, where they were denied access to formal learning. Many had to do menial work in these countries simply in order to survive. Almost all of the learner respondents therefore had first-hand experience of social marginalisation, which some continued to experience as migrants in Australia with low levels of English literacy.

Where the commonalities between learners ceased, was in their individual perceptions of their agency to make a difference to their own life situations. Learners such as Fatima and Yeanor had clear visions of their future identities, which fuelled their investment in mastering English. Their goal was to attain English proficiency that would enable them to get a job, which in turn would help them to integrate

more fully into Australian society. Indeed, their determination to achieve these goals is reinforced by literature which states that the qualities of strength, resilience and determination are the hallmarks of many individuals with refugee backgrounds (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007). For some of the other respondents, however, their agency was compromised by what they perceived and experienced as significant barriers to their ESL literacy learning. Yeanor and Hassan cited a lack of meaningful employment as a significant barrier to their learning of English. A number of the female learners in the study, such as Mariam, spoke of pressing family and household responsibilities that conflicted with their roles as language learners and distracted them from both classroom learning and practising their English skills beyond the classroom. For Yeanor and Hassan particularly, negative memories of the past, including violent conflict and loss, and yearning for absent or missing family members, distracted them from their efforts to learn.

Where the learners could clearly visualise their goals for language learning, these barriers assumed far less significance in the face of their sharply articulated and tightly-held imagined future identities. For example, Fatimah's imagined identity consisted in getting an Australian qualification and then embarking upon a career in nursing. Yeanor envisaged a future in which she would have increased access to a social network through obtaining a job that would provide her with "communion" with Australians. In these cases, learners' past experiences, far from defeating their perceived sense of agency, instead fuelled a burning desire to master English in order to assume extended identity positions in the future.

Viewed against the theoretical framework of identity formation put forward in this chapter, the learner accounts underscore Wenger's conceptualisation of identity as a process of "struggle" (1998, p. 149), requiring a process of continual negotiation through participation with significant others who help to define who we are. For these learners, this struggle involves the negotiation and renegotiation of their identities in terms of their membership of various communities, by balancing their roles as ESL literacy learners with those as immigrants, parents, homemakers, jobseekers and so on. Indeed, the complex, pressing and multilayered challenges related by each of the ESL literacy learners points to the inadequacy of skills-driven, employment-oriented programmes such as the LLNP to meet their learning and social needs.

Instead, this chapter contends that when literacy provision is viewed through a sociocultural lens, rich and meaningful literacy practices emerge that have the potential to open up effective skills and strategies that learners already use in order to inform teaching practices in the classroom. The act of 'literacy brokering' (Mazak, 2006; Perry, 2012; Prinsloo, 2005) is just one such practice, where, for example, Hassan relied upon his Sudanese neighbour to translate and explain the generic function of official letters and bills that arrived in his post box. In the same way, the consideration of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) guides teachers to scaffold their activities to allow some learners to carry out simpler,

more "low-risk" tasks until they develop the confidence to attempt more central participatory roles in the classroom.

The adoption of elements informed by a sociocultural perspective on literacy into skills-based literacy programs also has important implications for policy. Perry (2012) "suggests" that the highly prescriptive learning outcomes and assessment criteria imposed by those in positions of power, in other words, those who fund, design and deliver literacy programmes, need to be adjusted to reflect the achievements of those who enact literacy practices in different ways in their homes and communities. In the same way, a sociocultural perspective allows those involved in skills-based literacy programs to question and interrogate the overt way in which the LLNP links English literacy tuition to workplace readiness. Indeed, the link is so explicit that learners who fail to attend the requisite number of hours of the program may have their social security benefits withheld as a result. By making this link explicit, a sociocultural perspective encourages participants to engage with, and perhaps even resist, a discourse that clearly positions learners in a dependent relationship to those in power.

The importance of conducting learner identity research in literacy education is highlighted by Moje and Luke (2009), who observe that such research enables a distinct focus on the 'actor' or 'agent' in literacy practices. They contend that:

> identities mediate and are mediated by texts that individuals read, write and talk about … a theoretical focus on identity is crucial not to control the identities that students produce, construct, form or enact, but to avoid controlling identities. (p. 433)

Despite a current multicultural and political climate in which efforts are being made to maximise human and social capital, ESL literacy learners remain notably underrepresented in literacy research in Australia and elsewhere in English-speaking immigrant receiving countries (see Aird, Miller, van Megen, & Buys, 2010). This examination of learner identity in relation to four individuals facing significant barriers to literacy learning, reveals how adult ESL learners are positioned in a highly inequitable power relationship to the economically driven demands of their literacy programme, which in turn impacts upon their access to both material and social resources through employment. The argument is thus put forward that learner identity research that foregrounds the agency (or lack thereof) of the learners within similar skills-based literacy programs, is indeed timely and necessary.

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